

Review Essay

Islam in Pakistan: A History

Muhammad Qasim Zaman

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Since its inception in 1947, the significance of Pakistan in the theater of global politics and world history cannot be overstated. Pakistan the idea inspired the debates of the brightest intellectuals of the early twentieth century in colonial India, as they charted a way out from brutal British imperial domination. Pakistan the dream continues to inform the hearts of a third generation of citizens since birth—and those of millions of others who form the extensive Pakistani diaspora which colors nearly every other country in the world. Pakistan the Muslim homeland has been locked in perpetual conflict with its Hindu-dominated neighbor, yielding no less than three major wars. Pakistan the nation-state was the staging ground for the Afghan resistance that brought the Soviet Union to its knees and helped produce the ‘new world order.’ And now, once again, it finds itself—this time, less willingly—at the center of the US-led War on Terror. There is also Pakistan the nuclear power, which successfully created a new power balance in the region. And finally, there is Pakistan’s world image, which continues to provide fodder for the Hollywood entertainment industry: from 1988’s *Rambo III* to a recent Netflix series about a group of modern-day Robin Hoods that rob the Royal Mint of Spain utilizing a band of Pakistani hackers based in Islamabad.

Not surprisingly, *Islam in Pakistan* by veteran Princeton scholar Muhammad Qasim Zaman is a timely work of daunting scope and colossal significance. It aims to combine vast areas of study into a single comprehensive work on Islam in Pakistan: intellectual, political, and religious history at once. This challenge is remarkably achieved by Zaman, coupled with

keen insights and nuances that most other studies miss. His organization of this diverse material is brilliant and creative, which only adds to the instructive value and keeps the text stimulating and engaging.

For those interested in intellectual history (Pakistan as vision), chapter one (“Islamic Identities in Colonial India”) would be the most important. It draws up the Islamic mosaic of colonial India that ultimately led to the development of distinct Muslim groups and doctrinal configurations. Of course, he acknowledges at the outset the subjective nature of this enterprise and calls for a “careful handling” of terms, as categorization of human groupings tends to be more fluid than most writers care to admit. In the end, for him, Islamic groups fall under three broad umbrellas: traditionalist (those who appeal to the authority of past tradition, in however broad a sense), modernist (those who oppose formal religious authority and advocate applying the spirit of the Qurʾān and Sunnah to the challenges of modern life in a more adaptable way), and Islamist (those who advocate affirming God’s sovereignty in all areas of life with an emphasis on the political arena). I would add, however, that these identities tend to follow the contours of cultural-political divisions far more than personal convictions, and that they are frequently determined by constructions of brand and narrative.

Among the thought-provoking insights of this section is the following observation: “It is remarkable that doctrinal orientations that dominate Islam took their shape only during colonial rule in the late nineteenth century” (14). Though each group would like to ascribe authenticity and historical continuity to themselves, every human endeavor is ultimately a response to circumstance; contemporary Islamic groups, without exception, are as much a product of modernity as they are a response to it. The largest group in the traditionalist camp is that of the Deobandīs, named after a seminary founded in the namesake Indian town in 1866 (less than a decade after the onset of formal colonial rule) by two founding fathers: Gangohi (d. 1905) and Nanotawī (d. 1877). It aimed to preserve “proper Islamic norms among people while continuing long-standing traditions of Islamic scholarship” (15), specifically the Ḥanafī jurisprudential tradition as taught in India. However, Zaman notes that the Deoband enterprise still represented something new, and was reform-minded at its time, being “more indebted to the model of English public schools—classrooms, an academic calendar, a fixed curriculum, annual examinations—than they were to the institutions that had previously existed in India or elsewhere” (15). The second major group is that of the Barelawīs, named after the town

in northern India, Bareilly, of their founder Aḥmad Reza Khān (d. 1921). This group sought to preserve popular practices, especially those associated with mystical and “devotional practices centered on the shrines and persons of holy men” (16), in the face of calls for reform from the Deobandīs and the third traditionalist group: the Ahl-e Hadith. This last group was a more nebulous one going back to no single individual but to various figures such as Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890) of Bhopal. They strictly shunned the Ḥanafī legal tradition as well as all other schools of jurisprudence in favor of a direct, sometimes simplistic, reading of the Islamic textual sources. Representing the smallest and least influential of the three groups, it is often under-studied and mischaracterized. Zaman, for instance, devotes few lines to this group in his work and glosses over them more than once as the least ‘colorful’ of the groups, which could be contested by those more familiar with Ahl-e hadith practices in rural villages, where their Friday sermons tend to be more dramatic and theatrical than others’.

Not all the effects of colonialism or modernity are negative, Zaman keenly observes, for hard challenges bring with them great soul-searching and a sense of vigor which spurs new directions in thinking: “For all the deeply unsettling effects that colonial rule had on Muslims of South Asia, it had also served to kindle a new intellectual and religious vitality in traditionalist circles” (19). Indeed, the depth and vigor of early figures in all groups stands in marked contrast to their later followers. Even the early figures of the modernist camp were towering intellectuals, many of them well-grounded in Islamic scholarly traditions, such as Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), the “pioneering modernist of the nineteenth century” (23) who founded the famous Muhammad Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh (better known as Aligarh College); Shibli Nu‘mānī (d. 1914), an immense scholar and author who also went on to found Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ in Lucknow; Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī (d. 1953), Nu‘mānī’s star pupil and renowned scholar in his own right; and many others. By contrast, in later decades and current times, none (among the modernists or otherwise) could match them in stature, influence, or breadth of learning.

Indeed, history shows that some of the greatest thinkers are produced in the harshest circumstance. The renowned Qur’ānic commentator al-Qurṭubī, for instance, escaped the Crusaders in his native Spain—they killed his father on his family farm, forcing him to carry the body home—only to encounter the Mongol scourge in the Muslim heartlands. The battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt of 658/1260 occurred in his lifetime. A generation later, Ibn Taymiyyah not only lived through the aftermath of this Mongol destruction

but also spent a bulk of his life in prison, and yet he managed to produce a massive body of critical work that continues to be read today. The colonial conditions of South Asian Muslims should also be seen in that historical perspective.

The remainder of this chapter covers intellectual developments of the late colonial era until the birth of the new nation, illustrating debates between enormous Muslim personalities, detailing the Khilafat Movement that galvanized the Muslim populace to prevent the loss of the Ottoman Empire, and noting the circumstances that led to the Pakistan movement. The Khilafat Movement “demonstrated the power of pan-Islam in mobilizing Muslim sentiment. It had shown that the pan-Islamic sentiment could be effectively combined with Indian politics and that Muslims and Hindus could come together in pursuit of at least partially shared goals. It had also highlighted the authority and influence of the ‘ulama. ... No less remarkable was the spectacle of ‘ulama belonging to varied doctrinal orientations working together in defense of the Ottoman caliphate and the Islamic holy lands” (33). Zaman’s access to primary source materials (speeches, unpublished works, archives) makes this exposition invaluable.

Chapter two (“Modernism and Its Ethical Commitments”) tackles modernist commitments in more detail, as it presents a coherent political history of the new state. The Muslim modernist camp has found itself allied with the state, and specifically with authoritarian regimes, throughout much of Pakistan’s history. Apart from reasons of political expediency (in the rationale that the fastest way to effect change is from the top down), it must be admitted that the founding of the first Muslim state in modern history was always meant to be an ‘Islamic’ project. It is clear from the founders and theoreticians of Pakistan—from Iqbal the philosopher-poet to Jinnah the politician and many others—that the nation was to be the best expression of Muslim ideals in the modern world. The Aligarh-and-Oxford-educated Liaqat Ali Khan (d. 1951), the nation’s first prime minister and one of its founding fathers, framed the 1949 Objectives Resolution (which later became the preamble to the first constitution) as follows: “Sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to God Almighty alone ... [Muslims were to] be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accord with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and the Sunna” (56). These sections and others, however, were heavily contested, removed, and reapplied as successive governments struggled with the exact details of the role of Islam in the state.

The Muslim modernists were ultimately eclipsed following steady and heavy opposition from the *'ulamā'* class, who serve as the exclusive focus of chapter three ("The 'Ulama and the State"). One would imagine that a state founded in the name of Islam would carve out a central place for its religious scholars, but that is not how it played out. Shabbīr Aḥmad Usmānī (d. 1949), a Deobandī heavyweight, was the most visible scholar in Pakistan at the time of its birth. Close to Liaqat Ali Khan, he was given the informal title 'Shaykhul Islam' and the day after his death was declared a national holiday. But that was the extent of it. No serious attempt was made by government circles to utilize anyone from the scholarly class in any prominent role or official capacity, except in limited circumstances when needed (at the nation's birth and during war efforts). There were multiple opportunities to frame the constitution, form scholarly committees, and even engage research institutes. But the *'ulamā'* were largely left out or, in many cases, utilized only to be ignored. A 1956 Commission on Marriage and Family Laws included only one scholar, Ihtishām al-Ḥaqq Thānwī, who disagreed vehemently with the commission's ultimate report. He was sidelined. In 1961, President Ayub Khan passed the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, which followed the previous commission's recommendations. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī, a hugely influential scholar in early Pakistan and founder of the largest Deobandī madrasa, responded with strong objections in a letter to Ayub Khan. The government simply asked Ghulam Parwez, a Lahore-based modernist scholar, to respond to him. While successive governments consistently kept them at a distance, the traditionalist *'ulamā'* carved out an increasingly powerful independent space in Pakistani society, as the ending of the chapter demonstrates through an astute and thorough analysis of the extensive madrasa networks in Pakistan. There were several major government initiatives directed at regulating (even reforming) the madrasa systems, but these were mostly unsuccessful.

Chapter four ("Islamism and the Sovereignty of God") demonstrates the ingenuity of Zaman's analysis. Rather than presenting a history, as many have done, of the work and movement of Sayyid Abū al-Ala Mawdūdī (d. 1979), one of the most influential Islamist ideologues of the twentieth century, Zaman does something entirely new. He aims to trace the intellectual genealogy of a simple idea that is a defining feature of Mawdūdī's thought: the sovereignty of God. Based on Q. 12:40 and other verses which speak of God's *mulk* and *ḥukm* (literally 'kingdom' and 'rule'), these words received an historically-novel interpretation as God's sovereignty by Mawdūdī in

the 1930s, an understanding which was picked up by the Egyptian Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) and from him, by the rest of the world—or so the prevailing account goes, *ad nauseum*.

Zaman rightfully points out that this is a modern term with a particular history in European political thought, and that it is worth exploring the genesis of this interpretation. But no one yet has sought to explore the historical conditions of Mawdūdī's time, in order to explore how he developed this understanding of divine sovereignty. Zaman first turns to the medieval tradition to see how various Muslim scholars interpreted these Qur'ānic terms. Not surprisingly, there were a wide range of interpretations, from minimalist to more expansive. Political authority could certainly be included within those meanings, but few medieval scholars used it in that sense directly. It was used close to the political sense by Rashid Rida in the early 1900s and more directly even earlier by the Ottoman scholar Ali Suavi (d. 1878), who may have been the first Muslim figure to use the term sovereignty for God in this way.

But Zaman is more interested in the idea's immediate context in late colonial India. He observes: "A new awareness that the Muslim population in India, despite its large size, was nonetheless an increasingly disadvantaged minority in relation to the Hindus, memories of centuries of Muslim rule, and deep anxieties about the future of Islam not just at home but in the world at large had combined to make colonial India a particularly fertile soil for reflections on the sovereignty of God" (141). Abūl Kalām Azād, the firebrand pan-Islamic writer and anti-colonialist, wrote a 1913 article entitled "Authority Belongs to God Alone," where he spoke of God's government. Shāh 'Abd al-Qadir (d. 1813), a son of Shāh Waliullāh and one of the first translators of the Qur'ān into Urdu, and more importantly the ethicist Nazir Aḥmad, who produced one of the first English translations of the Qur'ān which was widely read in colonial India, both used overtly political translations of these terms. Muḥammad 'Alī Jawhar (d. 1931), the single most prominent leader of the Khilafat Movement, read Nazir Aḥmad's translation and began overtly speaking of God's sovereignty, including the following confident declaration during his trial before a British judge: "Islam recognizes one sovereignty alone, the sovereignty of God, which is supreme and unconditional, indivisible and inalienable" (145). Mawdūdī was part of the Khilafat Movement and likely must have known Muḥammad 'Alī Jawhar. Another impact on Mawdūdī was the renowned poet Muḥammad Iqbāl, who spoke of many concepts such as the viceregency of God

(*niyābat-e ilāhī*) in his celebrated verses which find echoes in Mawdūdī's writings. A final influence Zaman identifies was the environment of the princely state of Hyderabad, which tried to maintain sovereign status under the British Empire, even lodging an ineffectual protest at the UN. Interestingly, Mawdūdī published a treatise making the case for the sovereignty of Hyderabad. As Zaman notes, God's sovereignty was very much in the air in late colonial India.

Apart from Mawdūdī, Zaman painstakingly documents widespread use of the term throughout India and Pakistan by scholars of all stripes, traditionalist and modernist alike. It made its way into the Pakistani constitution, and even the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (articles 2, 56). Zaman concludes: "That Mawdūdī was not the originator of the idea of the sovereignty of God should not obscure the stamp that he was able to put on it. His formulation also had the virtues of simplicity and comprehensiveness... Once Mawdūdī's formulation of the sovereignty of God had gained traction, inside and outside Pakistan, it was very difficult to argue against it" (163).

However, such a focus by Zaman and others places an inordinate attention on the use of terms themselves, sometimes at the expense of historical context and language use. When medieval commentators referred to *mulk* and *ḥukm*, as outlined by Zaman, they were speaking in their own respective contexts in an attempt to consider the timeless meanings of the Qurʾān within their own circumstances. This is the reason for the differences in exegetical reports regarding various verses, as Ibn Taymiyyah explores in his treatise on the principles of exegesis (translated as *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafseer* [Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah Publishing, 1993]), where interpretive differences are explained as being differing expressions of the same reality, elaborations, illustrations, or (more rarely) substantive differences in understanding. But these statements are always contextual. Thus the philosopher-exegete al-Rāzī interpreted Qurʾān 12:40 (*Authority (al-ḥukm) belongs to God alone*) to mean a rejection of free will and human agency in favor of God's predeterminative power. And the theologian al-ʿAmidī interprets this verse as meaning that "the intellect cannot characterize anything as good or bad nor does [the intellect suffice to] demonstrate the necessity of showing gratitude towards a benefactor," echoing standard Ashʿarī doctrine. For Islamists or others to interpret the verse in their context as sovereignty—a meaning which Zaman notes already appears in the

term's broader meanings as per medieval scholars—is not a fundamentally new enterprise.

The rest of the book contains valuable chapters on religious minorities in Pakistan, the domain of Sufism in Pakistan, and a study of the fraught relationship between religion, violence, and the state. Zaman points to a prolonged decline in the fortunes of Sufism over the course of Pakistan's history for a variety of reasons: lack of significant intellectual output, modern scientific sensibilities, decline of literacy in Persian (many Sufi works were authored in Persian), the abuses of institutionalized Sufism, the vulnerability of shrines to government regulation (as opposed to Deobandī madrasas), general defensiveness in the face of steady criticism from other doctrinal orientations, and finally, violence directed at their institutions.

Chapter seven (“Religion, Violence and the State”) is particularly timely, as it analyzes the conflicts in Kashmir and Afghanistan which sadly continue to be played out today. Zaman points to a longstanding state-supported discourse on jihad that was meant to sustain its military efforts; but he cautions against viewing religious violence in Pakistan as simply state-sponsored, even if these forces have often been aligned with the government, because non-state actors possess agency, power, and influence of their own. He laments the failure of the state to develop a counter-narrative to the Taliban franchise, and presents the reasons for that.

There are many strengths in Zaman's work. His deep analysis reveals nuances and demonstrates the need to recognize the fluidity of categories and caricatures. I wish to highlight some interesting examples that contradict prevailing notions. Ashraf ‘Alī Thānwī and Aḥmad Reza Khān were both opposed to the Khilafat Movement which aimed to unite the Muslim world and save the dying Ottoman Caliphate. The reasons they gave for this stance in their fatwās on the topic are even more interesting: they were appalled at the idea of Hindus and other non-Muslims entering mosques to stand in alliance with Muslims. Meanwhile, Abūl Kalām Azād and Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī were forging lifelong alliances with Hindu leaders such as Gandhi. Today, it is usually the Barelwī and others ascribing themselves to Sufi orientations that champion inter-faith causes and accuse their detractors of exhibiting extremist tendencies and hatred of non-Muslims. In another telling exchange, Mawdūdī was fiercely opposed to the idea of covert operations and individuals volunteering to fight in Kashmir in 1947, citing that this was opposed to the true spirit of jihad, which must be declared openly and by legitimate state authority. It was traditionalist scholars of

the Deobandī persuasion, namely Shabbīr Aḥmad Usmanī, that took him to task and defended such actions, resulting in heated exchanges. In this, Mawdūdī the Islamist was demonstrating more concordance with traditional Islamic jurisprudence—as well as greater understanding of modern international law—than the ‘traditionalists.’

Zaman’s epilogue begins by highlighting what has remained constant: “It is remarkable, however, that none of the Islamic orientations that existed or were in the process of emerging at the turn of the 20th century had ceased to exist a hundred years later” (265). The institutional and socio-political prominence of the ‘*ulamā*’ is also a constant—as opposed to how they fared in other Muslim states—as is the persistent failure of the government to significantly regulate Islam.

What has changed, then? The shifting boundaries among the groups, for one. The ‘*ulamā*’ have evolved and acquired greater Western education. There has been less room for Sufic devotional piety among Deobandīs over time, with notable exceptions. Both the Islamists and modernists have moved closer to the Deobandīs. In the end, the real winners in Pakistan have been this latter group: “More than others, the Deobandis have been able to combine scripturalism with a continuing fidelity to the Hanafi legal tradition, religio-political activism with Sufi piety, scholarly productivity with populism, and this has paid dividends in terms of a greater reach and influence in state and society” (267).

Islamic modernism is the central focus and running idea of Zaman’s work. He defines it as “a complex of religious, intellectual, and political initiatives aimed at adapting Islam...to the challenges of life in the modern world” (3). His conclusion is that it has not fared well, for it has lost the ‘moral authority’ it boasted at Pakistan’s inception. Similarly, Islamism with all its promise and global appeal has not been successful in achieving its goals in Pakistan. The domain of Sufism has diminished over time, as has the influence of the ‘*ulamā*’ (at least politically). With so many lost opportunities, hard questions must be raised. With so many things on the decline, what exactly is on the rise? What has happened to Pakistan the dream?

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